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CONFERENCE REPORT

Differences and Connections: Beyond Universal Theories in Planning, Urban, and Heritage Studies

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The annual AESOP Young Academics (AESOP-YA) conference, entitled *Differences and Connections*, was held for the first time in a Southern Italian city, Palermo, Italy, 23-26 March 2015. The call for papers attracted a wide range of authors within the field of planning and other related fields. Forty-five contributions by young academic scholars, representing nineteen countries, were selected by the conference scientific committee to critically explore the themes of the conference.

Over the last few decades, cities, societies, economies and institutional arrangements have experienced momentous changes, driven by globalisation, urbanisation, migration and mobility as well as totalitarian regimes, democratisation processes, and insurgencies. Scholars in planning and other related fields have engaged diverse critical debates to make sense of these trends and their impacts on spatial planning and urban governance.

Several post-colonial studies reveal (Chakrabarty, 2000; Santos, 2010) doubts about the capacity of mainstream and other universal theories to grasp and express the specific relationships that connect global trends with local characteristics. Studies on planning cultures (Sanyal, 2005; Knieling, Othengrafen, 2009; Getimis, 2012) and the methodological approach of phronetic research (Flyvbjerg, 2004) have stressed the importance of local contextual characterisations for the production of theory. Similar approaches in critical urban studies uncover the risk for building generalisations grounded in the study of a few global cities (Amin, Graham, 1997; Robinson, 2011).

One of the traditional yet current debate is the divide between the so-called 'Western World' and 'Global South'. This divide embraces a tendency of using theories grounded on the study of Western cities to prefigure a "universally valid" pathway for human social development' (Healey, 2012, 191) to be replicated around the world. This is exemplified, in heritage studies, by the way outstanding universal values and global approaches to conservation technologies have framed the way heritage is valued and conserved worldwide, in particular by UNESCO and its World Heritage Convention (1972) – the approaches tend to be Western-centric, exclusionary in nature, and inflicted by a lack of context sensitivity (Harrison, 2013; Hammami, 2012; Ashworth, 2011; Smith, 2006). The diverse international calls for social inclusions challenged the hegemonic nature of these values and approaches. In specific, UNESCO published the report 'Our Creative Diversity' (1995), promoting new terminologies within the global development discourses, including the terms 'rights', 'diversity', 'communities' and 'pluralism' (Hammami 2012). Looking at cities, governance patterns and insurgent practices in the Global South, planning scholars have advocated the 'de-provincialisation' and 'de-parochialisation' of urban and planning theories (Roy, 2009; Meagher, 2010). They also called for the need for social theory in the West to 'learn' from different places in the world (Slater 1992). Yet, the Western and non-Western divide continue to shape academic and public debates. Baptista (2013) has therefore suggested that looking at the specificities of places at the 'borderlands' is the most appropriate way to furthering the debates on the 'sites of epistemological production' of urban theory. New critical approaches share an underlying concern with the risk that an a-critical use of concepts generated by a global outlook may force or distort the very

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understanding of local processes and trends and, therefore, not produce useful insights for practice and transformative action – hence the need for renovated efforts towards comparative studies and a theoretical building more attuned to regional and local characteristics.

These debates formed a basis for the AESOP-YA conference 2015. The choice of the conference location was also part of the conference ideology. Palermo, both for its recent history and its location in Southern Europe, can itself be considered a place at the borderlands of urban theory (Tulumello, 2015).

The five keynote speeches engaged the theme of ‘differences and connections’, and gave interesting inputs to the three themes of the conference: dialogues between planning theory and research, comparative studies, and heritage and the politics of local-global divide. The speeches set out a set of questions, from two perspectives – one of theory building and one about the relations between theory and practice. As for a main theoretical perspective and as reference for the first session, Patsy Healey considered generalisation as a practice to illustrate its challenges and pitfalls exploring the question of how we can see the general in the particular and vice versa. Jean Hillier considered inter-disciplinary connections between spatial planning, physics, politics and non-human geography focusing on the recognition of uncertainty in planning law. Cornelius Holtorf questioned the conventional conception of heritage by explaining the role of fictional forms of heritage in present-day urban communities and contribute to the reflections of the third session. When it comes to theory-practice relations, Laura Saija explored the planning imagination in the XXI century and the responsibility to practical relevance (especially focusing on the role of young in academia); and Leonie Sandercock explored the use of film as a mean of inquiry and a catalyst for community development. These speeches critically inspired the conference debates: their inputs set the tone for the three core themes of the conference, enabling students and senior academics to exchange ideas.

Dialogues between planning theory and research, critical urban theories, human and cultural geography, critical heritage studies and beyond

Despite the various forms of dialogues between planning research and critical urban studies several theoretical voids are still evident at the border between analyses of micro-practices of policy-making and critiques of urban trends. The participants in the four sessions of this theme were invited to explore and challenge the borders of disciplines, and offer methodological, epistemological and empirical reflections on how different theoretical foundations may collaborate for renovating scholarship and practice.

A group of presenters in this theme addressed the challenges of generalizability in the mainstream theories with respect to responsiveness to contextual specificities. Aoife Doyle discussed the inadequacy of pre-determined institutional criteria and underlined the need for a more comprehensive understanding of the key contextual and governance issues to sustain or enhance the resilience of cities. In line with Doyle’s argument, Karel Van den Berge and Thomas Verbeek discussed the ambition of mainstream theories for building universal understanding and the risk of failing to notice local specificities through the studies of a port-city planning and the connection between public health and planning in Belgium. In that vein, Mohammed Saleh introduced the informal collectives/self-organized movements, drawing on the case of Cairo, as a potential initiator/trigger of new forms of governance that can respond to the requirements, the potentials and the limits of localities. Following the debates on generalizability, another group of presenters explored the communicative divide between local people and decision-makers. Enzo Falco drew attention to the use of open source software in community planning as a tool to empower citizens in the production of community plans. Roberto Falanga continued by defining

cities as open democratic laboratories in which political, economic and social sectors are involved in the process of policymaking. In line with the discussions of participation and empowerment of citizens, Johanna Holvander presented the case study of Tallin, Estonia, in which she discussed the influential role and the contribution of movements organized by neighbourhood associations on spatial planning practice. Finally, Nazem Tahvilzadeh extended the discussion with a focus on the optimistic and critical perspectives of invited participation amidst urban planning conflicts. He pointed out the exigency of reconciliation of the tension between participatory governance arrangements and representative government.

A third group of presentations made specific contributions to planning education debates. Meiken Levin-Keitel raised concerns over the use of psychological methods in planning and introduced the “Systemic Structural Constellations” method as a means to solve complex and uncertain tasks hardly solved using normative theories. Lukas Gilliard also drew attention to planning education and argued for the requirement of an educational approach that provides an interdisciplinary dialogue among the fields of urban planning, development and other related fields.

Comparative studies, de-parochialising theories

This theme addressed the goal of overcoming the dominance of mainstream thinking and theory building through comparative and reflexive studies, looking specifically at planning systems and cultures, places and studies at the margins of theory, universalisation and its pitfalls. Clemens de Olde used a theoretical framework for planning cultures in Flanders to question the dominant intervention of global neoliberalization processes in different planning cultures. Maria Luisa Giordano analysed both the linguistic constructions of the terminologies of intra-urban spaces, such as neighbourhood, district, quarter, *quartieri*, *quartiers*, in the English, Italian, and French languages, and the discursive constructions of various forms of collective identities. Cora Fontana debated a case of universalisation of ‘southern’ scholarly discourse, that of the Peruvian economist Hernando de Soto about the regularisation of informal settlements: in doing so, it was debated *which* discourses travel and arise within a global dimension. Sujee Jung offered a comparative study about the strategies for hosting refugees in different regions of South Korea, looking at the clashes between the national strategies and the localised approaches adopted in specific cases. Ignacio Castillo Ulloa dwelled on his professional experience as a planner in Costa Rica to question the ways planning discourses are bound socially, and advocate for a co-constitution of planning theory-research-practice that is grounded in local characterisations and micro-practices. Lina Berglund Snodgrass looked at the safety agenda in the Swedish institutional practice of planning and emphasised a universalistic approach of looking for the ‘right’ solution on the basis of broad consensus. She called for the invention of a system that can provide ‘choice’ to the recipients of safety regulations.

Heritage and the politics of local-global divide

The third theme was designed to generate critical dialogues between planning research and cultural heritage studies. The contributions to the two sessions of this theme demonstrated how the fields of planning and heritage embrace unparalleled visions despite their historical links in theory and practice. They also brought cases from different parts of the world to explain the Western-centricity of heritage practices and their adverse impacts on everyday life. Most of the presenters called for a more inclusive approach to planning and heritage that expands beyond any form of universalism and local-global divide. Carol Ludwig, Jennie Sjöholm and Sahar Khoshnood dwelled on Smith’s (2006)

authorized heritage discourse to uncover its impacts on heritage as a profession and cultural practice. Ludwig explored such impacts within the conservation planning and heritage designation in England, paying specific attention to its adverse influence on the capacity of professionals to take into consideration issues of pluralism and inevitable diverse interpretations of the past. In response to growing ideological gaps between professionals and community groups, Ludwig called for a sector-wide epistemological shift within conservation planning from realism to realms of rhetoric. Sjöholm scrutinised the impacts of the authorised heritage discourse within conservation planning in Sweden. Focusing on the Swedish mining town of Kiruna, Sjöholm explained how a predetermined conception of the past and its spatial representation within conservation planning have reduced the complexity of urban to collection of buildings, and thereby resulted in socio-spatial exclusionary practices. Khoshnood attempted to demonstrate the irrelevance of universal heritage practices and their Western-centric models by comparing ideas of heritage within the context of lived-in historic centres located in contemporary Middle-East and European cities. The contributions by Aleksa Korolija and Aliaksandra Smirnova engaged with critical discussions on heritage, urban planning and the politics of identity after WWII. Korolija explored the role of “picturesque” in the post WWII Yugoslavian architecture, The focus on the urban projects and partisan memorials that were designed by Bogdan Bogdanović allowed Korolija to explain how picturesque landscape has been used as a tool to assimilate the ethnic heterogeneity of Yugoslavia after WWII. Smirnova investigated the reconstruction of Minsk after WWII based on Soviet Urban Planning ideals. The contribution by Martina Motta and Aleksa Korolija looked at the uses of the past in the invention of holiday places. By analysing the vacation architecture in Italian holiday places, they uncovered the symbolic uses of traditional spatial elements and building techniques in order to produce holiday places that are distinguishable from everyday places, expressing modernity and tradition. The contribution by Wisnu Setiawan investigated the social conflicts that are often involved in decontextualised urban projects. Setiawan used the case of Indonesia to demonstrate the opportunities that heritage conservation policies can offer to transform potential social conflicts to a more positive social behaviour. Setiawan thus called for new strategies within planning, architecture and heritage practices that address the diverse socio-cultural groups of a society to be able to manage and mitigate conflicts.

Conclusions: towards a ‘community of inquirers’?

As expressed by broad scope and interdependence of these three themes, the conference program and call for papers aimed at creating an ‘open’ field for a wide and critical engagement with the diverse approaches within planning researches, urban studies and heritage studies rather than circumscribe a limited conference scope and theme. The four days of debates and critical discussions uncovered how the future research communities struggle to build ‘new’ conceptual tools and approaches beyond both universalism and localism in order to cope with the new contemporary trends that have challenged planning, urban, and heritage studies. This indicates the growing demand to make academia a ‘community of inquirers’, and open to debate, exchange and mutual learning worldwide. The participants expressed a consensus on the need to not fall into the pitfall of particularism and localism, but also the awareness that, often, it is outside mainstream ‘international’ communities that the most creative and innovative contributions are produced (Fall & Minca 2013). AESOP YA Network will keep working in this direction, exploring the debates and organising new chances for the future academic community to discuss and exchange ideas, in Europe and beyond.

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